

“The Love Ethic”

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

*‘... this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel
after that time, declares the Lord.*

*I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts.
I will be their God, and they will be my people. ‘*

Jeremiah 31:33^b

Let us pray... O God,

Why is it so hard for your Kingdom to come on Earth as it is in Heaven?

Why is it so hard for us to love others as we would like to be loved?

As we seek to love you, help us become that Beloved Community we hope for.

Amen

“Save a tree” – did you ever hear that expression?

Did you ever say it yourself – like when the supermarket clerk says,

“Paper or plastic?” and you say, “Save a tree” and take the plastic bag?

Well, that saying, “Save a tree”, is mine!

I am the first person I know of to say, “Save a tree.”

It was in the 1970s – before there were plastic bags,

and I had purchased one or two things at a supermarket;

The clerk went to put them in a paper bag and I said,

“Save a tree” and just took the things I purchased.

Now, do I *really* believe I am the first person in the whole world to say that –
let alone be able cash in on any copyrights?

No, I think there was a growing awareness for conservation at that time
even before ‘green’ became the code word for environmental concerns,

so the conditions for someone to say, “Save a tree”

were already there – even though I don’t remember hearing it anywhere else.

As far as I know, I’m the first person to say, “Save a tree.”

Something that is true is going to be true even before people put words to it.

It’s just a matter of time for someone to discover it and name it –

which can happen simultaneously

by different people in different locations.

Sacred stories come about this way as myths with similar themes

that arise out of diverse cultures, but relate to our common humanity.

An example of this historically, is the Axial Age of the 6th Century BCE

that gave rise to many of the world’s great religions,

including religious Judaism, Buddhism, and a reformed Hinduism.

Willard, p.2

Though these prophetic religions come to different conclusions about Ultimate Reality, they all agree that it makes sense to be kind – rational loving-kindness otherwise called, “The Golden Rule”.
“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, or
“Don’t do unto others as you wouldn’t have them do unto you”;
But *not*, “Do unto others before they do unto you”!

I believe this “law” is written into our DNA as human beings, though in human history, it took up to the 6th Century BCE, 2500 years ago, before someone in those various religious cultures said it and wrote it down.

The Book of Jeremiah was also being written about this time, which included these words from our lesson today:
‘...I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ *Jeremiah 31:33^b*

These ‘Instructions’ – this commandment to love, has always been there in human hearts, and at the same time, continually needs to be recognized and applied with each generation. I believe another name for this is the ‘love ethic’.

For the past two years, I have given a class on Walter Wink’s 1996 pamphlet, “Homosexuality & The Bible”.

Wink acknowledges that the Bible condemns homosexual behavior, but he also notes that the Bible condones slavery which is morally abhorrent to us now.

With regard to sexuality, the Bible has no consistent ‘sexual ethic’, but condones the sexual mores of Jewish culture in ancient times – which included polygamy.

According to Walter Wink, what we are to glean from this paradox is that the Bible still serves as a guide, in this way:

Our moral task, then, is to apply Jesus’ love ethic to whatever sexual mores are prevalent in a given culture. This doesn’t mean everything goes.

It means that everything is to be critiqued by Jesus’ love commandment.

He speaks of a ‘love ethic’!

It emerges as a phrase distinguishing how we should interpret the Bible – it is the lens by which we are to see, the bias from which we are to have our perspective, and the litmus test for how we should critique ourselves and others.

Willard, p.3

I happened to find this phrase, the 'love ethic', in an earlier source – one of Malcolm Boyd's prayers from his 1965 book,

Are You Running With Me, Jesus?

*...we offer thanks for the love ethic you have given us,
and for the social justice, nonviolence, and peace,
wherever these are found and
particularly where they indicate active opposition to
injustice and false peace.*

Boyd applied this concept of the 'love ethic' to Christian social action, which back in the mid-1960s was about Civil Rights, anti-War, and Women's rights, as well as other liberation movements.

The 'love ethic' still applies in the 21st Century –

though it seems to be harder to see how effectively it can be applied.

Inhuman behavior overseas and at home, can disturb our very faith in humanity, making us question that there is any good at all that can be achieved.

Yet it is into such a world that Christ was born and with which he contended, and that his followers would establish congregations despite persecution.

They had something that helped them keep going –

they had joy, because they were doing what they loved,
living in accordance with the law of love, the ethic of love.

The 'love ethic' is one example of those terms we must become as familiar with as "communion", "resurrection", and "salvation".

There are other terms like the "myth of redemptive violence"

and the "single victim mechanism" we need to be aware of, too.

These negative realities have always been with us, too,

requiring us to recognize and thwart them when we can.

The "myth of redemptive violence" is the delusion that violence by itself can bring about peace – when it only serves to foment vengeance.

For example, the Civil War did not end the underlying conditions of slavery –

it still took the nonviolent fight 100 years later

for Civil Rights to even begin to address that.

The "single victim mechanism" is the principal of scapegoating

subconsciously by any of us and consciously by some of us –

especially "the powers that be",

another phrase that has been around a long time.

Lynchings and assassinations are specific examples

of that negative reality that Jesus knew he would have to confront through crucifixion.

Willard, p.4

Scapegoating can work its way into the thinking of well-meaning,
faithful people who are blinded by their literalism

like that conservative church in Tennessee that posted on its sign,
“Remember – Satan was the first to demand equal rights.”

The backlash from members of the community was so strong –

that a new message was put up on the marquee soon after, which read:
“*Glad you [are] reading, did not intend to offend, we all need Christ.*”

The hopeful part of this story is that the residents

of this Southern ‘Bible belt’ town knew that such a message
was inconsistent with the character of Christ
and the ‘love ethic’ of Jesus.

Likewise, Franklin Graham – Billy Graham’s son, wrote on his Facebook page
a harsh and simplistic answer to the social crises

between communities and their police, saying:

Listen up--Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and everybody else.

Most police shootings can be avoided.

It comes down to respect for authority and obedience...

*It’s as simple as that. Even if you think the police officer is wrong—
YOU OBEY.*

This letter prompted a response from national church leaders

who said that Graham was taking the position of ‘antibellum churches’ –
that means pre-Civil War theology justifying slavery,
and with his worldwide charitable work through Samaritan’s Purse,
Franklin Graham should know better.

What is ironic is that Graham closed his hurtful message saying:

The Bible says to submit to your leaders and those in authority

“because they keep watch over you

as those who must give an account” –

which means civic leaders and the police are accountable to the community
for their behavior, which is what the crisis in Ferguson
and elsewhere is really about.

Last week, I was invited to visit with Charles McCollough –

a UCC minister who served on national staff and who is a sculptor,
to explore possibilities for my sabbatical
which now I’m looking at doing in the summer of 2017.

At his church, Christ Congregation UCC,

he gave a power-point talk on his latest project using art
to interpret the Gospel.

Willard, p.5

He described the two worlds that Jesus lived in –
the Roman world and the Jewish community.
Rome with its harsh oppression through violence and taxation
was a constant reminder for the Jewish people
that they were living in an occupied land
The Jews struggled to maintain their distinctive identity
even as their leaders were co-opted to support the Romans.
In the midst of this situation, came Jesus and later the apostles
who would introduce a new way – a new ethic to live by
as a life of joy despite outward circumstances.
This was best illustrated for me by Charles McCollough's
sculpture of a joyful shepherd who has found the lost sheep.
It is the joy that comes from allowing love to work in your life –
the work ethic of love.

One of the best examples of this
is a beautiful passage from Acts 16...
Paul and his fellow apostle, Silas, were imprisoned
and late into the night they were praying and singing hymns
as the other prisoners listened.
Then an earthquake broke down the walls of the jail so that they all could escape.
The jailer thought that is what they did and because he was responsible,
he prepared to kill himself.
But Paul called out to him to stop
because everyone had stayed right where they were.
The jailer was so amazed he asked what must he do to be saved.

Contemporary theologian, Brian McLaren, says we are not to assume
the jailer was asking for 'salvation' into life after death,
but to be saved in this life.

The jailer was as much a prisoner as Paul and Silas
and he wanted what they had.

And they said,

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Acts 16:31

What they had to offer was love – a life guided by the 'love ethic' of Jesus
that taught them that even their oppressor could choose to change –
which is the only way that love can work.

Amen

*Our scripture lesson today from Jeremiah 31:31-34,
speaks to a time that anticipated God's saving action in the midst of exile.
Though the people of Israel suffered for breaking the Law of Moses,
God promised them – and us, the establishment of a new law
based on the unbreakable relationship of God's love.*

[31] The time is coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.

[32] It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.

They broke that covenant with me
even though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

[33] No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel
after that time, declares the Lord.

I will put my Instructions within them
and engrave them on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

[34] They will no longer need to teach each other to say,
"Know the Lord!" because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord;
for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

John 12:20-33 [RSV]

[20] Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks.

[21] So these came to Philip, who was from Beth-sa'ida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

[22] Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus.

[23] And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.

[24] Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

[25] [Those] who [love their] life [will lose] it, and [those] who [hate their] life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

[26] If any one serves me, [they] must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the [Abba/]Father will honor [them].

[27] "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.

[28] Father, glorify thy name."

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

[29] The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

[30] Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

[31] Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out;

[32] and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."

[33] He said this to show by what death he was to die.